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KAMPUCHEA: The Sihanouk Factor

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Prince Sihanouk's recently announced willingness to lead a united Kampuchean resistance front, including Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea, was accompanied by some controversial preconditions. If these problems are overcome, Sihanouk could provide a major psychological lift to the resistance on both the international and domestic scene. Progress, however, is likely to be slow at best. [redacted]

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Sihanouk asked China and Democratic Kampuchea to agree to abandon the name "Democratic Kampuchea" and return to the use of "Cambodia." He also demanded that Democratic Kampuchea vacate its seat at the UN in favor of the new front. [redacted]

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In addition, the former Kampuchean leader requested military and financial support for the non-Communist segment of the front comparable to that given to Pol Pot's forces. He wants all united front forces to disarm, however, following the ouster of the Vietnamese and then have the country policed "for several years" by a UN-guaranteed international supervisory force. [redacted]

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China, Democratic Kampuchea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have publicly welcomed Sihanouk's announcement but are bothered by some of his preconditions. They will be especially reluctant to change Democratic Kampuchea's name, fearing that this could result in an empty seat at the UN or cause Democratic Kampuchea to lose its seat to the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh. Beijing and Democratic Kampuchea also will avoid any commitments on future disarmament and UN policy, because they would sap the morale of the insurgents and distract attention from the need to increase pressure on Vietnam. [redacted]

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The question of aid should be the least difficult. China probably would agree to such assistance, although it would want to draw the US and Japan into the process to ensure maximum international recognition. [redacted]

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Other Concerns

China, Democratic Kampuchea, and Thailand may have additional reservations. To varying degrees, they view Sihanouk as unpredictable and wonder whether his announcement is designed merely to complicate and retard negotiations to create a united front between Democratic Kampuchea and former Prime Minister Son Sann, leader of the non-Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front. Moreover, Sihanouk's continued verbal attacks on Democratic Kampuchea--even while offering to cooperate--are not conducive to future unity. [redacted]

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ASEAN states have not collectively responded to Sihanouk's announcement but will probably do so shortly. Thailand only halfheartedly welcomed the development, while Indonesian and Philippine officials stated that ASEAN probably would accept Sihanouk's political leadership--but only as a figurehead. Singapore, however, directly requested the West and Japan to welcome publicly Sihanouk's political reemergence. [redacted]

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Sihanouk's About-Face

Sihanouk previously insisted that he would never cooperate with Democratic Kampuchea because of its acts of repression. Developments suggesting that Son Sann might soon agree to cooperate with Pol Pot in a broader anti-Vietnamese front, however, probably persuaded Sihanouk that he could no longer remain aloof. [redacted]

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The Prince also may be playing for time. He has stated privately that he is "in no hurry" to strike a deal. [redacted]

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Sihanouk's preconditions are aimed at resolving the dilemma posed by Pol Pot's forces, who are anathema to most Kampucheans and yet provide the only significant military resistance to the Vietnamese. Given his own previous identification with Pol Pot and his subsequent abuse by Democratic Kampuchea, Sihanouk is averse to joining that government once more. His proposal that resistance forces be disarmed after a Vietnamese withdrawal--however impractical--also is an effort to offer the Kampuchean people hope that there would be no resumption of Pol Pot's brutal policies. [redacted]

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Prospects

The process of forming the new front, with or without Sihanouk, will be lengthy and unpredictable. Sihanouk will meet with Democratic Kampuchean leader Khieu Samphan in Pyongyang at the end of February and apparently intends to ask Son Sann to participate. [REDACTED]

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If an agreement is reached, Sihanouk almost certainly would attract support from the Kampuchean people--even including some Democratic Kampuchean rank and file--and this could help foster unity. Perhaps more important, as a respected international figure he would add to the front's legitimacy among Third World and Western countries. [REDACTED]

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On the other hand, Sihanouk is likely to retain his hostility toward Pol Pot and his competitive relationship with Son Sann. Although the Prince has said he would be willing to serve as a figurehead, he probably would try to carve out a position in which he could exercise some real control and influence over the future makeup of the Kampuchean state. [REDACTED]

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